

***Lost Highways Game Changers* Transcript**

Underwriting: *Lost Highways*, from History Colorado, is made possible by the Sturm Family Foundation, proud supporters of the humanities and the power of storytelling, for more than twenty years.

Noel: Hey, it's Noel. And this is a special episode of *Lost Highways* celebrating the 100th anniversary of Negro League Baseball and the little-known role Colorado played in integrating our national pastime. This spring of 2020, at the History Colorado Center in downtown Denver, an exhibition featuring rare baseball artifacts from the Marshall Fogel collection tells the story of African Americans in baseball. If you're listening to this while you are enjoying the *Game Changers* exhibition, we hope this brief podcast will enrich your experience with the artifacts on view. But even if you can't make it to the museum, we think you'll enjoy this podcast on its own.

[Music fades in]

Noel: To tell the story, here's baseball historian and History Colorado's own Chief Creative Officer, Jason Hanson.

Jason Hanson: The lights were on above Merchants Park, down on south Broadway, glowing incandescent yellow, as the sun set behind the Rocky Mountains to the west, and a record crowd gathered in the grandstands. It was the opening day of the annual Denver Post Baseball Tournament - "The Little World Series of the West," as the paper liked to call it.

And this final game of the day was the one everyone had been waiting for. Poss Parsons, sports editor of the Denver Post, had invited the Kansas City Monarchs, champions of the Negro National League, to participate in the tournament that year. The idea was to raise the level of play.

The Post Tournament was celebrating its twentieth anniversary that summer. The prize money attracted talented teams from around the country - often with major league ringers added to the lineup just for the tournament. And it had established a reputation for showcasing some of the best baseball west of St. Louis.

The Monarch's lineup for the tournament featured star players at nearly every position, including Bullet Joe Rogan, Turkey Stearnes, and Willie Foster, all of them in the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame today.

And at 8:30 that evening, the Monarchs took the field against a local team from Greeley. There had been exhibition games and barnstorming games and other informal contests between black and white players for almost as long as baseball had been segregated, but this warm August night, in Denver, was the first time that players at a professional level played integrated baseball, the first time that it was a *real* competition.

It was a remarkable game in segregated America, much less in a city and state not a decade removed from Klu Klux Klan control at every level of government. One might've expected sparks, bottles thrown on the field, threats, or worse. But Coloradans, on that warm August night, just seemed happy to see good baseball.

The Denver Post Tournament in 1934 was a pivotal point in the long history of African American players in baseball--a history as old as the game itself. A history that in many ways mirrors American history from the Reconstruction period after the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement of the late twentieth century, *and* up to today. Black players, *shut out* of major league baseball, organized their own leagues, broke back through the color barrier, and, in important ways, shaped not just the game, but the American story... well beyond the ballfield.

[Music fades out]

Jason Hanson: You've probably heard about Jackie Robinson. That he was the first African American to play in Major League Baseball. But he wasn't.

That distinction belongs to Moses Fleetwood Walker - people called him Fleet - and he was one of the best players in baseball, black or white, before the color line segregated the sport. In 1884, Walker was the *first* African American player to play professionally in quote, "organized baseball." He was the star catcher on the pennant-winning Toledo Blue Stockings of the American Association. He and his brother, Weldy, who joined Fleet on the Toledo team, would be the last until Jackie Robinson took the field in 1947.

Communities of all sizes - from the teeming boroughs of New York City to farming hamlets dotting the Midwest, to mining camps here in the Rocky Mountains - fielded their own teams, playing regional rivals for Sunday entertainment and bragging rights. The best of these teams

paid their players and organized competitive leagues such as the American Association, the forerunners of today's Major League Baseball.

In the decades after that war to end slavery, the expansion of rights for African Americans had made it seem possible that baseball could truly be "America's Game." More than seventy African Americans played on integrated baseball teams with whites during the latter part of the nineteenth century. In one notable instance close to home, a black man named Bud Fowler starred at second base for the Pueblo Pastimes in 1885.

But it was a fleeting moment. A color line was coming into focus on the baseball field. In 1883, Cap Anson, the leader of the Chicago White Stockings, had threatened to boycott a game against Toledo if Moses Fleetwood Walker played. Although Anson eventually relented that time, he vowed never to put his team on the same field as an African American player ever again. He made good on that vow in later years, refusing to field his team if his opponents had black players on their roster.

[Music]

Jason Hanson: Anson's racism was not uncommon in baseball - or the nation more broadly - and others followed his lead in drawing a hard line against integration. Although no formal policy banning black players was ever instituted, the white owners of the leading teams conspired in a "gentlemen's agreement" to segregate the game. By the 1890s, the foul lines marked the color line, preventing African American players from stepping onto the field in Major League Baseball.

As Jim Crow segregation rose in the south and spread its dark wings over the nation, African American players shut out of Major League Baseball formed their own teams.

In 1920, a pitcher with a nasty breaking ball and a mind for business named Rube Foster united the best black teams into a league - the Negro League, in the language of the day. Foster envisioned a league that would play at the same high level as the white major leagues - and maybe higher. Amid a smoldering national climate of racial tension, which had already ignited into violent race riots in cities like Chicago, Omaha, and East St. Louis, Foster proclaimed to the new members of the league: "We are the ship. All else, the sea."

All-black teams like the Kansas City Monarchs, the Chicago American Giants, the Homestead Grays, and the Pittsburgh Crawfords prospered, playing a style of baseball that was often faster and more intense - and many thought more entertaining - than what fans saw in the white major leagues.

They played in the Negro National League, which was the original founded by Foster, as well as the Eastern Colored League and the Negro American League, supported by a variety of semiprofessional leagues throughout the country, that often gave local players their start. The teams travelled constantly, playing two or three games in a day - and, after the Monarchs pioneered *night* baseball under portable lights, often four games before the day was done.

Star players became legends.

Josh Gibson hit so many home runs - and hit them so hard and so far - that some people called him the “Black Babe Ruth,” although others suggested that *Ruth* should have been called the “White Josh Gibson.”

Cool Papa Bell staked a claim as the fastest man in baseball, black or white. He was a threat to score from first on a bunt, and one teammate liked to say that Bell was so fast, he could flip off the light switch and be in bed before the room got dark.

Oscar Charleston may be the greatest baseball player that even fans have never heard of. In a career that stretched from 1915 to 1940, awestruck contemporaries said he hit for power like Ruth, hit for average like Ty Cobb, and locked down center field like *no one* until Willie Mays came along.

Byron Johnson, an all-star shortstop for the Kansas City Monarchs, saw Charleston toward the twilight of his career. In an oral history in the History Colorado archives, Johnson recalled:

[Music stops]

[Byron Johnson Oral History audio clip]

Byron Johnson: He was a big man. And I remember that everybody had a whole lot of respect for that man because he could *hit that ball*. I remember that.

[End of clip]

Jason Hanson: Charleston played with fury and refused to back down to anyone, on the field or off. Cool Papa Bell recalled one incident when Charleston ripped the white hood off a Ku Klux Klansman who had been taunting him. Baseball historian Bill James, the guy whose advanced statistical analysis has transformed the game today, determined that Charleston was one of the top four ball players of all time.

And then there was Satchel Paige, Leroy Robert Paige, who earned his nickname as a child carrying suitcases at the train station in Mobile, Alabama. "Satch" was the biggest draw in the Negro Leagues throughout the 1930s and '40s. He was dominant. He threw an arsenal of pitches with names like "midnight rider" and the "trouble ball." His talent was matched by his charisma and showmanship.

Here's renowned collector and baseball historian Marshal Fogel describing one of Paige's most famous gimmicks:

Marshal Fogel: Satchel Paige had everybody sit down that was playing on the field because he said he could strike out the other team. And the ballplayers on his team could just sit down and wait till he struck out the side. And he did!

[Music]

Jason Hanson: Paige was a legend in his own time, but Byron Johnson, who played with, and against Paige, believed the hype was justified. When historian Jay Sanford asked whether Paige was "as good" as the stories said he was, Johnson replied:

[Byron Johnson Oral History audio clip]

Byron Johnson: I never saw a pitcher, of all of them, that had the control that Stachel did. ... Satch knew where he was throwing that ball. And he used to laugh. He said, ‘You can’t hit old Satch. I’ll tell you where I’m going to throw it. And you ain’t going to hit it. You know, something like that!

[End of clip]

Jason Hanson: When Satchel Paige came to Denver for the Post Tournament in 1934, he arrived as a hired arm for a team called The House of David. House of David was an all-white, baseball-loving religious community from Michigan, where the men weren’t allowed to cut their hair or shave their beards. Despite the fact that Satchel Paige was neither white nor bearded, the House of David team knew they needed him if they were going to beat the Monarchs and take home the prize money. True to his reputation, Paige delivered. Paige did his “call the outfielders in” gimmick the first time he pitched, to the *total* delight of the crowd. And when the House of David team faced the Monarchs in the championship game, he got down to business and held them off in a 2 to 1 win.

In 1936, Satchel Paige came back to Denver with a hand-picked team of Negro League All-Stars on a quest to win the tournament. The team featured four of the game’s all-time greats: Satchel on the mound, Josh Gibson catching, Buck Leonard at first base, and Cool Papa Bell in center field. They may have been the best baseball team that has ever played in Denver, and they walked away with the championship.

All in all, black teams played white teams more than 400 times in off-season exhibition games during the segregated period between Moses Fleetwood Walker's 1884 season in Toledo and Jackie Robinson's 1947 debut in Brooklyn. By most accounts, the African American teams won 60 to 75 percent of those games. But the exhibition nature of the games made it possible for segregation-minded fans and major league executives to dismiss them - and black baseball players - as below the major league standard of play.

The Denver Post Tournament was harder to dismiss. The prize money attracted talented players, many of whom went on to the big leagues. The integrated games in Denver during the 1930s were not simply entertaining exhibitions, but *real* competitions. And with each story sportswriters wired out from Denver to newspapers around the nation praising the African American players' skill and talent, the tournament disproved the notion that black players *couldn't* play with white players or that the Negro Leagues represented an inferior "shadowball" form of the big league game.

Jackie Robinson played one season in the Negro Leagues with the Kansas City Monarchs before joining the Brooklyn Dodgers. A coalition of black journalists, progressive activists, and others had been campaigning for baseball's integration for more than a decade when Dodger's General Manager Branch Rickey signed Robinson. Rickey picked Robinson not *just* for his talent but because he figured he could stand up to the abuse that was sure to be aimed at him.

[Music fades out]

Jason Hanson: When Robinson began the 1947 season with the Dodgers, the first black man in the Major Leagues since Fleet Walker, some fans and opposing players met him with raw racism and abuse. Robinson met the hatred with dignity and forbearance. He kept a promise to let his play speak for him during his first seasons. His skill and electrifying playmaking ultimately forced his opponents to admit his *rightful* place in the game. He won Rookie of the Year in 1947 and was the National League's Most Valuable Player two years later. In his ten-year career, Jackie hit for a .311 average and stole home nineteen times.

[Music]

Jason Hanson: Once Jackie broke through, others followed him from the Negro Leagues into Major League Baseball. The influx of all that talent, all on the same field at last, created one of the great golden eras in the history of baseball. Larry Doby, Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe, Minnie Minoso, Ernie Banks, and Curt Roberts were among the players who joined the major leagues on newly integrated teams over the next few years.

Even Satchel Paige, then well into his 40s, came to play. He joined the Cleveland Indians in 1948 as the oldest "rookie" in major league history. Paige still had enough juice in his arm to help push the Indians to the pennant, and pitch in the World Series that year. And in 1952 and '53, now approaching fifty years old, he was selected to the American League All-Star team, representing the St. Louis Browns. When the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame formed a special committee in 1971 to elect deserving players who had spent their best seasons, or *all* their seasons, in the Negro Leagues, Satchel Paige was the first man they elected.

As more of the most talented players in the Negro Leagues signed with integrated Major League teams, the drain took a toll. The Negro Leagues began to falter in the 1950s. But even in these twilight years, they nurtured the early careers of some of the game's all-time greats. Willie Mays was already starring for the Birmingham Black Barons as a *teenager* when he signed with the New York Giants in 1951. Before his career was done, he would hit 660 home runs and redefine the standard for center fielders, roaming the outfield as no one had since, perhaps, Oscar Charleston.

And then there was Hank Aaron. After starting his career in the Negro Leagues with the Indianapolis Clowns in 1952, Hank Aaron joined the Braves in 1954. When he finally retired in 1976, he was the last player in Major League Baseball who had started his career in the Negro Leagues. Along the way, he hit 755 home runs, slugging his way past Babe Ruth to become baseball's home run king.

[Music fades out]

Jason Hanson: Jackie Robinson and the black players who marched behind him into Major League Baseball quickly and completely shattered the racist stereotype that African Americans on segregated Negro League teams had not been playing at the same level as their white counterparts in the big leagues. Between 1947 and 1960, veterans of the Negro Leagues won *nine* Most Valuable Player awards in the more-integrated National League. In the same span, eight of the league's Rookie of the Year awards went to African American players, several of whom never played in the Negro Leagues at all. And many of those same black players and others in both leagues were perennial All-Stars.

Baseball historian and collector Marshall Fogel has a soft spot for Jackie Robinson. Among his vast collection of memorabilia, he has: original photographs that chronicle Robinson's career; a program from his first game with the Dodgers; even a 1947 advertisement for bread featuring Jackie and his family - one of the first times an African American family had been featured in a widespread advertising campaign.

Marshall Fogel: I can't say enough about what a star he is emotionally beyond his playing ability.... It's not just as being a great player, but because he handled himself so well.... And this whole issue of segregation and integration into baseball, again, if God was looking down at him... with a finger... he would say "pick Jackie Robinson because he was the right person at the right place at the right time". And then even after his career ended, he - he was a real advocate for not only civil rights, but for the civility of people coming together, regardless of who they were or what - how much money they had - or whether they were of a different race. He was the ambassador of goodwill, equally important in - in our quest for all of us to get along. He was a star.

[Music fades in]

Jason Hanson: Always a Civil Rights activist, Jackie used the platform he created on the baseball diamond to continue to advance the cause beyond the ballfield. Outspoken during his playing days, in his retirement he wrote newspaper columns, hosted a radio show, talked policy with presidents, and could often be found at marches, always advocating equality for all Americans.

But his leadership in the integration of baseball remained the *defining* act of his life. In 1968, twenty-two years after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to Robinson's teammate, Don Newcombe. He said that their integration of baseball had paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement. Newcombe recounted the story years later:

[Don Newcombe radio audio clip]

Don Newcombe: He said to me Don, you Jackie, Roy, and Larry will never know how easy you made it for me to do what I have done in Civil Rights by what you men did on the baseball field. And I want you all to know that.

[End of clip]

Jason Hanson: To honor his legacy on the baseball field and beyond, in 1997 every major league team retired Robinson's number, 42.

One hundred years ago, in 1920, Rube Foster formed the Negro leagues.

In a segregated nation, it would showcase African American ballplayers who were, by any measure, the equal to their fellow Americans of all colors, on the ballfield and beyond. "We are the ship," Foster told his partners a hundred years ago. "All else the sea."

The dream that Rube Foster launched with the Negro Leagues would not founder. Jackie Robinson would pilot it home. In 1947, baseball became one of the first significant institutions in

American society - before the Army, before public transportation, before school systems - to walk away from the false divisions of segregation.

The Negro Leagues paved the way to integrating baseball. Ever after, America's Game would look more like America. In doing so, it showed Americans new possibilities, how great we might be on the field *together* instead of separate. It was a powerful vision, one that galvanized the Civil Rights Movement.

Today, baseball continues on the path that Moses and Rube and Jackie and countless others set it on. More than 40 percent of current Major League Baseball players are people of color, representing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and originating from more than twenty countries and territories.

One hundred years later, we sail on, together.

Credits:

Noel: *Lost Highways* is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios.

It is made possible by a generous grant from the Sturm Family Foundation, with particular thanks to Stephen Sturm and Emily Sturm.

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